



Back to College: Are University Graduates Returning to Community Colleges?

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ITEM 6

Reverse transfer has recently become a topic of interest. There are concerns that some university graduates are having a difficult time finding good jobs and are enrolling in community college programs to make themselves competitive in the job market. To assess the extent of reverse transfer, the Commission conducted an analysis combining enrollment data from the community colleges with data on degrees awarded from the University of California and the California State University. This analysis showed that recent university graduates are taking classes at community colleges, just like other state residents, but that they are not taking course loads suggesting that they are working on programs needed to qualify for a career.

Table 1 shows community college enrollment by graduates awarded bachelor's degrees by UC and CSU in 2001. Over a quarter of these graduates took community college courses of some kind in the three years after graduation, but most took noncredit courses only or took a very light course load. Nearly 60% of the university graduates taking community college units for credit after graduation took 6 or fewer units in the seven semesters between fall 2001 and winter 2004.

Very few university graduates are taking community college courses at loads indicating a sustained effort toward an award. A total of 30 units in the three years following graduation indicates a sustained part-time effort—it is a load of 4 to 5 units per semester continued over seven semesters. Only 1.5% of

UC graduates and 1.0% of CSU graduates took courses at this level or higher.

Graduates taking full-time or near-full-time community college loads are very rare. Of the 93,000 graduates awarded bachelor's degrees by UC and CSU in 2001, only 135 took more than 60 units in the three years after graduation.

Table 1. University graduates at community colleges

	University of California		California State University	
Identifiable graduates awarded bachelor's degrees in 2001	33,363	100%	59,231	100%
Graduates taking community college courses between fall 2001 and fall 2004				
Taking noncredit courses only	1,818	5%	3,913	7%
Taking courses for credit	7,824	24%	11,616	20%
6 units or less	4,264	13%	6,976	12%
7 to 15 units	2,076	6%	2,737	5%
16 to 30 units	997	3.0%	1,296	2.2%
More than 30 units	487	1.5%	607	1.0%

Data from the Commission's Longitudinal Student Data System. This system has enrollment data with an ID code that identifies individual students allowing the progress of students to be followed as they move between the three systems.

Identifiable graduates are the number of individuals awarded bachelor's degrees who were identified in a way that allows them to be identified in the enrollment records of other systems. Nearly 99% of the bachelor's degrees awarded by UC and CSU in 2001 were identified in this way.

Differences between disciplines

Enrollment of university graduates at community colleges varies somewhat between disciplines. Criminal justice graduates and others from the public safety disciplines have the highest rate of enrollment, with 2.7% taking more than 30 community college units within 3 years of graduation (see Table 2, next page). Graduates in computer sciences and biological sciences also tend to take more community college courses than graduates in other disciplines.

Table 2. Community college enrollment by degree discipline

	Graduates awarded bachelor's degrees in 2001 by UC and CSU	Graduates taking more than 30 units between fall 2001 and fall 2004	
Business administration	15,130	130	0.9%
Social sciences	10,770	143	1.3%
Liberal arts, humanities	6,890	35	0.5%
Psychology	6,750	96	1.4%
Biological sciences	6,130	107	1.7%
Engineering	4,840	46	0.9%
Visual & performing arts	4,660	54	1.2%
English language & literature	4,480	42	0.9%
Multidisciplinary studies	4,370	43	1.0%
Communication, journalism	3,890	31	0.8%
Education	3,460	49	1.4%
Computer sciences	2,690	50	1.9%
Health sciences	2,580	39	1.5%
History	2,320	27	1.2%
Public safety	1,840	50	2.7%

Disciplines with more than 1,500 graduates in 2001

Commission Longitudinal Student Data System

Table 3. Community college enrollment as a percentage of the population

	Age group				
	18–21	22–25	26–30	31–35	36–40
Percentage of California population taking community college courses between fall 2001 and fall 2004					
Taking noncredit courses only	10.0%	9.4%	7.7%	6.5%	5.5%
Taking courses for credit	46.0%	27.2%	16.1%	11.3%	9.2%
6 units or less	9.5%	9.0%	6.6%	5.1%	4.4%
7 to 15 units	9.2	6.8	4.0	2.8	2.2
16 to 30 units	8.5	5.2	2.8	1.8	1.4
More than 30 units	18.8	6.2	2.7	1.6	1.2

Age group is based on age in fall 2001, not age at time of enrollment. The figures show, for example, that 46% of people who were aged 18–21 in fall 2001 took some community college courses for credit at some time between fall 2001 and fall 2004.

Commission calculation based on Longitudinal Student Data System and California Department Finance population estimates.

The degree disciplines taken by students seeking a more general education—social sciences, humanities, and psychology—generally have fewer graduates in community college. Degrees in these subjects are sometimes accused of leaving their graduates ill-prepared for careers, but there is no evidence from the enrollment data that these graduates are seeking community college awards requiring extensive courses of study.

Overall enrollment rates

Comparing enrollments by university graduates with enrollments of the population as a whole shows that university graduates are enrolling at community colleges much less than other people in their age group.

The 2001 UC and CSU graduates were generally between 22 and 27 years of age. As noted earlier, only 1.0–1.5% of these graduates took more than 30 community college units within three years of graduation. The figures for overall community college enrollment as a percentage of the entire population (see Table 3) show that 2.7% of people who were aged 26–30 in fall 2001 took more than 30 units over a three-year period.

The data shows that university graduates are enrolling at community colleges at rates comparable to those of the 31–35 and 36–40 age groups. Rather than taking course loads suggesting that they are seeking qualifications needed to enter a career, it appears that UC and CSU graduates are taking community college courses at rates comparable to people in their thirties who are established in the workforce and seeking to improve their skills or broaden their education.